

UN agency for Palestinians raises only \$107 million of \$300 million needed

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Palestinians carry bags of flour destined for poor families at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) distribution centre, in Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip [Said Khatib/AFP]

United Nations, June 5 (RHC)-- Donor countries have provided just \$107 million in new funds for the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, falling significantly short of the \$300 million it needs to continue helping millions of people in Israeli-occupied territories and refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Philippe Lazzarini, commissioner general of the agency known as UNRWA, said he was grateful for the new pledges but they are below the amount required to keep more than 700 schools and 140 clinics open from September through December.

“We will continue to work tirelessly with our partners, including host countries – the refugees’ top supporters – to raise the funds needed,” he said in a statement.

The pledging conference, which took place at the UN headquarters in New York on Friday, came as UN chief Antonio Guterres warned that the UNRWA “is on the verge of financial collapse,” pointing out that the agency is already running with a shortfall of nearly \$75 million.

At the beginning of the year, the UNRWA appealed for \$1.6bn for its programmes, operations and emergency responses across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. That includes nearly \$850m for its core budget, which includes running schools and health clinics.

According to the UNRWA, donors on Friday announced \$812.3 million in pledges, but just \$107.2 million were new contributions. The countries pledging new funds were not announced. Lazzarini told a press conference on Thursday that the UNRWA needs \$150m to keep all services running until the end of the year, and an additional \$50 million to start 2024 without liabilities. In addition, he said, the agency needs \$75 million to keep the food pipeline in Gaza operating and about \$30m for its cash distribution programme in Syria and Lebanon.

Adnan Abu Hasna, from the UNRWA in Gaza, said the agency is in a severe financial crisis right now.

“Nearly half a million students in our schools are dependent on our services. We provide food to nearly 1.2 million Palestine refugees,” he told Al Jazeera. “In a place like Gaza, any shaking of our programs or our activities or services will threaten the stability and even the social fabric, as refugees are dependent on our cash assistance programme on education and health.”

The UNRWA was founded in the wake of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 to provide hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were forcibly displaced from their homes with education, healthcare, social services and in some cases, jobs. Today, their numbers – with descendants – have grown to some 5.9 million people, most in the Gaza Strip and illegally occupied West Bank, as well as neighboring countries in the Middle East.

The UNRWA has faced a financial crisis for 10 years, but Lazzarini said the current crisis is “massive,” calling it “our main existential threat.” “It is deepening, and our ability to muddle through is slowly but surely coming to an end,” he said. “The situation is even more critical now that some of our committed donors have indicated that they will substantially decrease their contribution to the agency.”

Guterres said in a speech read by his chief of staff at the start of the pledging conference that “when UNRWA’s future hangs in the balance, so do the lives of millions of Palestine refugees relying on essential services.”

Those services include education for more than half a million girls and boys, healthcare for about two million people, job opportunities for young people in Gaza and elsewhere, psycho-social support for hundreds of thousands of children, and a social safety net for nearly half a million of the poorest Palestinians, he said. More than 1.2 million Palestinians also receive humanitarian assistance.

“Remember, hundreds of thousands of them [Palestinians] were forcibly evicted from their homes after the war that followed the creation of the state of Israel,” Al Jazeera’s Nida Ibrahim, reporting from the occupied West Bank, said. “The agency has been saying for years it’s deeply underfunded,” she said.

“And people here say that the international community and the donors are gradually abandoning their duties when it comes to refugees.”

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